

## VIEWS FROM THE MONASTERY KITCHEN\*

Fieldwork with Tibetan Monks and Nuns

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It is morning again. From the *lha-khai* across the courtyard the chanting has already begun. The Himalayan air is cold and until the sun rises it is best to remain inside; in the monastery kitchen, the best seat is near the huge black ovens. I settle myself on my thick woolen mat close to the desk of Chagdzo, the manager. It is from that desk and by means of those ovens combined together within the blackened kitchen of the monastery that the affairs of his Buddhist community are administered and supported. It is from the vantage point of the kitchen with its constant provision of butter tea, the comradery of the monks and the industry of the nuns that I have settled myself to research the day to day expression of Tibetan Buddhism.

Like all the men and women in the community Chagdzo is clad in purple: an ankle length skirt of wool wrapped tightly with a woolen belt, and on top he wears a knitted red sweater over his orange sleeveless blouse. In order to remain free for the vigorous domestic matters that keep him in constant motion throughout the day Chagdzo discards his monastic cape here. The other nuns and monks working with him are also too active to encumber themselves with the layers of formal robes. My comrades of the kitchen contrast with the motionless row of lotus-seated monks and nuns whose chanting is heard from across the courtyard. The elegantly adorned shrine, the *lha-khai*, pulses with the rhythm of their sutra-chanting, and its painted walls are alive with benevolent as well as wrathful manifestations of hundreds of Tibetan deities all alight from the scores of butter lamps flickering around the hall.

The kitchen rather dark by comparison, but after my eyes become accustomed to the smoke and the murmuring style of speech, it is clear that the constant movement of people here, the continual directives emanating from here and the endless swarm of chores in progress together make this a more instructional situation in which to study the practice of living Buddhism. Sitting in the kitchen and

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watching, it becomes apparent that Chagdzo is the key figure in the affairs of the entire monastery, and it is from his desk that much of the activities are orchestrated. What is proceeding in the shrine is, so to speak, the finished product: the delivery to the gods. The scholarship and art of the ritual liturgy have emerged only after there has been a process of education, of production and of coordination between kitchen and altar, between layman and cleric having been negotiated by Chagdzo and his cadre of monks and nuns. This system had become a traditional procedure, but it is also practical for Chagdzo to conduct his operations from the kitchen, and that is where you usually find him. Half of the low-ceilinged blackened room is lined with platforms covered with woolen Tibetan mats, the other half house the huge oven and storage shelves. At the sides are piled firewood and pots, and there is an enormous caldron storing fresh cold water. Just barely visible by the firelight thrown against the wall is an emblem scratched in white above the caldron: a drawing of the tashi dargya, the eight auspicious symbols. Above that are written the Tibetan letters ལྷ་མཚན་ལྷ་མཚན་ an invocation to the water god. The vessel itself is filled from a rubber hose, newly imported, which extends to the ceiling and across to the door. Outside, it disappears over the monastery roof as it makes its way to the auspicious water spring discovered not far from the compound. There are no chairs or tables, leaving the centre of the room relatively free for the constant traffic. The main entrance into the courtyard is at one end—at the other side, opposite the main door is another entrance leading into the less frequented chamber, the storeroom where all the monastic supplies—from bolts of cloth to sacks of tsampa flour—are kept under lock and key. Three small cupboards are set in the corners of the sitting-platforms between the mats, providing a kind of elbow desk for Chagdzo, myself and anyone else sitting along here. At one end, just beyond my own platform seat is a small iron stove like the potbellied variety we use in our own winter cottages. This provides a separate facility where an old cook—servant of the lama prepares meals for him, for his aged mother, for Chagdzo and for me. All others are served out of those enormous brass caldrons on the main stove where two buxom nuns constantly lift and stir. Since there are no chimneys or open windows, over the years the mud walls have become blackened, but each New Year when decorations are made, those dusty walls are brightened by graphic and naturalistic designs.

These are white marks, made by dabbings of the thumb which has first been dampened and set with flour. White dots are pressed on a line so as to make a fretted border all the way around the room 3 feet above our platforms. Above that border the walls are embellished with images, dotted outlines of birds, fish, flowers and ribbons. Months later now, traces of these white designs against the black wall of the kitchen convey the sense of cherishment and care, even if they

are unlike the elegant, colourful more serious venerabilia we find reverberating from the walls of the assembly hall.

The nuns and monks in the kitchen function as extensions of the lama and Chagdzo; each is occupied with his own job but all work together with pride and a sense of service to the lama. Theirs too is religious work, as important as that of their fellow *chös-pa* who chant sutras in the *lha-khari*. The kitchen team constitutes a kind of select group chosen to do particular activities, and thereby enjoys a degree of freedom from the chanting routine. At the same time they acquire a closer and more intimate access to the lama, the abbot whom they serve. The kitchen is the link between the lama and the rest of the community. Secluded in his chamber or enthroned at the front of the shrine, the lama sends instructions directly to the kitchen where Chagdzo sees they are carried out. One young monk in the kitchen is the *chös-pön*, as serious and quiet boy who as master of the votive offerings is required to spend a great deal of time here decorating the offerings, cleaning, polishing and refilling the butter lamps, and preparing other ritual objects. Two blackened, shy nuns and another youth serve tea and help prepare meals. They are untiring and cheerful, busily shifting vessels of food, polishing and scouring pots, pumping gallon after gallon of Tibetan tea. Much energy is spent churning the liquid with butter and salt in long wooden tubes to emulsify the generous quantities of butter. While the old servant who cooks for the lama prepares item after item of the most delicate of Tibetan cuisine, another old monk remains seated in apparent oblivion wrapped in his shawl, stooped over a text. Motionless for most of the day, he mutters through the syllables as he puzzles some grammatical issue the lama has called him here to resolve. The sunny mountainside does not appeal to the scholar and he prefers the conviviality and hot tea at his disposal in the kitchen. Straining at his texts in the near darkness, he mumbles his monotone without end. But he frequently interrupts himself to join our conversations or to toy with my camera and tape recorder. He periodically fingers through my field-notebook poised with his red pencil in search of spelling mistakes among the Tibetan words he can recognize scattered through the pages. If unable to find a spelling error my inspector offers to elaborate on certain lexicographical issues, adding synonyms and derivatives into my text. However, when I invite him to become my grammar teacher, he declines saying he has only to finish this text for the lama and will return to the village to live with his son. But he examines my notebook again and teases me at the letters— རྒྱུ་མཚན་ — cause, appearing alone among a page of English words. That such an abstract concept could appear in isolation is for him a source of hilarity and he chuckles and slaps his thigh intermittently throughout the day.

Quietly, although purposefully, individual monks and nuns enter the kitchen from the courtyard approaching Chagdzo with deference as they extend for his inspection pieces of their work, assignments he delegated in the morning. One woman has been doing calligraphy, copying a text borrowed from another lama's library, and Chagdzo knows by examining the consistency of the ink and the spacing of the letters whether it is good copywork. Another nun who has spent the week pounding paper in order to give it a smoother finish also appears here twice a day, and returns to a room off the main courtyard to continue her pounding. The monastery has a tailor, not a full monk although with shaven head, who comes here for a week or two at a time to stitch ceremonial garments, canopies, and hats. Others who catch Chagdzo in mid-stride asking for his inspection and advice are nuns engaged in printing prayer-flags, polishing butter-lamps, and preparing inks and dyes. Although relaxed and familiar, each bends in deference waiting for Chagdzo's instructions. If there are any doubts he takes it to the lama who oversees everything. There is constant movement and conversation, yet all proceeds with neither-noise nor flurry; each task and each person is given due attention.

Still, Chagdzo always has an eye on his watch—an alarm clock sits on a shelf at his elbow. It has been set for mid-day to remind him of the visit he must make to the huts above the temple where repairs are needed. There are only two other items besides these clocks that constitute Chagdzo's office equipment: a lidless cash box made from a discarded cookie tin, and a somewhat more efficient, looking account book, a black diary bound in western style. In this, throughout the day, Chagdzo jots lists of numbers and names with an ancient red fountain pen he had been given in the 1940's by an Everest explorer who passed through his former monastery in Tibet. As for the cash box it is not so much a receptacle as it is a target for the bits of currency Chagdzo tosses its way. Although chief treasurer of the monastery, Chagdzo appears impatient when dealing directly with cash, and simply drops bills anywhere around his cushion. Despite this apparent unconcern Chagdzo is attentive to the smallest detail and is sharply aware of all the financial transactions of the community. If he allows himself to rest for a moment, he sets his eyes on a thought. Preoccupied, he unconsciously twitches his fingers around the edge of his chin, occasionally lifting his pinched thumb and forefinger to inspect a thread of hair that has been captured. This random plucking is the Tibetan method of shaving.

Chagdzo's ear is particularly alert for two sounds, both of which move him from his place with startling alacrity. One is the signal from the buzzer, set in the

ceiling below the lama's chamber by which the lama summons his chief servant and administrator. As soon as he hears it, Chagdzo is off his mat and has disappeared up the narrow stairway into the silent room above where none but the most intimate servants are permitted. The other sound that enjoins Chagdzo's attention pulsates across the courtyard penetrating the very walls of the kitchen. This is the deep drone of the monks's chanting combined with the booming of the long brass horns and conch shells. They come from the main hall of the shrine where behind the four guardians painted on the outside foyer, over a hundred monks and nuns are assembled in ritual offering. From the clashing gongs and cymbals mixed with seemingly unintelligible rumblings of the sutrachanting, Chagdzo identifies the progress of the ritual and sees that in the kitchen the appropriate offerings are prepared. Whatever his preoccupation he does not miss a signal. His kitchen staff, the cooks and the young *chös-pön*, and the other attendant whose duty it is to serve tea and prepare materials for the lama are all equally alert, not a second behind Chagdzo. They are ready with their brimming kettles, trays, ladles to move between the kitchen and the shrine back and forth with precision and confidence, each man and woman handling his role with equal dignity.

The *chös-pön*, a young monk of no more than twenty called Losang, acts as apprentice to Chagdzo and regularly consults him. He proceeds nevertheless with his duties as if fully trained. He enters the kitchen from the assembly hall and unobtrusively approaches Chagdzo's desk holding in one hand a sparkling silver chalice, this time filled with white curd. From the edge of the bowl with his other hand the young monk lifts a slender silver spoon filled with the glistening liquid to which Chagdzo offers his own palm. The curd is poured into it and without formality or hesitation Chagdzo draws his cupped hand towards his mouth and licks away the curd. As he does so the boy has moved on towards my mat inviting me to partake of the offering. I repeat Chagdzo's gesture while Losang proceeds to each of the others in the kitchen.

Those assembled in the shrine have already partaken of this portion of the offering and have moved on to the offering of sweetwater which likewise will be circulated to the kitchen staff. Just as are the chanting assembly we too are members of the community. When *tsog* is offered each individual in the community must receive a portion; not even the dog is overlooked and the cooks will see that some scraps remain to throw to the birds. Predictably, moments after the curd and sweetwater have been distributed, the main plate of *tsog* arrives, one for each of us and again I am given mine after Chagdzo. This offering plate consists of a cooked rice packed into the shape of a cone, about a pound in weight and coated

with a red food dye. Called *torma*, this rice is the basic element in the offering but the other items usually accompany it: a sweet (manufactured) cookie, a fried donut-like Tibetan biscuit, some popped corn, glazed candy (again, manufactured), and a chip of dried meat, brown and crisp with age but nevertheless delicious. While most members of the community are either in the kitchen or the assembly hall there are a few, the aged and frail or those involved in special meditative exercises who remain in their private huts scattered around the hill above the main temple compound. Equal members of the community, they are also entitled to share the *tsog*, and either a cook or one of their kinsmen in the assembly sees that a portion is delivered to their huts. A religious gathering, whether it is a monthly assembly or a permanent community, is for its members a community in which everyone is regarded with equal respect and accommodation; while each person retains his individuality and may enjoy his particular possessions and offices, there is a strong sense of sharing with and contributing to the work of the lama and to his selfless service of religion. This is symbolized in the *tsog*, the plate of offerings, which means literally: the group.

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I remember my own privileged visit to a small monastic centre lying remote and withdrawn where, following the tradition of extensive meditation set by its recluse leader, all the monks and nuns remain for months at a time in their own huts meditating. There is no assembly in a communal shrine. On the auspicious occasion coinciding with my visit to this impoverished but nevertheless intense community, one of its members, a monk of fifty-five received a very special initiation from the lama. He had just completed the rigorous but prestigious meditative exercise requiring him to remain secluded and mute for three years, three months and three days. Apart from the lama, the *chagdzo* and two others who had been invited to assist in the preparations, all the other monks and nuns remained in retreat, each in his own hut or cave set individually into the mountainside. As part of his initiation, after the solemn and climactic offering of the mandala, the lama bestowed new powers and a new name on the monk. Following that ceremony the monk distributed the *tsog*. The kitchen, hardly more than a shed, had come to life for two days as *torma* and sweets were prepared. A niece of the man, a nun about 22 years of age, had been to the distant bazaar for provisions for this special ceremony. The initiation itself was modest, attended by only the honoured monk's kinsmen and those few of us visiting the lama. At the end of the ceremony, the initiate, assisted by his niece and me, carried laden trays of *tsog*, out to the sequestered men and women.

Sometimes, as we approached the fenced-in courtyard of a cave, all we saw

was a bare arm reaching out to accept a share of the offering after which it withdrew and the robed figure retreated into the darkness of the private dwelling. Meditation is usually carried out in seclusion and total silence so that not even words of congratulations or thanks are exchanged. At one dwelling hardly discernable from the surrounding rocks and foliage, there was no response to our tap on the wooden barrier. We slid the tray under the gate hoping the monk would awaken and fetch it before the birds came for their share. We visited more than thirty huts here. Since each was secluded and some distance from the next, we had walked over several acres of mountainside before we had finished.

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So here in this monastery kitchen the ovens are always hot and fresh tea is always being brewed. Food offering and distribution is a central activity in these religious communities and it is not difficult to understand why the kitchen is a focal point. As such it is the ideal meeting place. This is where visiting kinsmen, officers of the monastery, novices, businessmen and travellers congregate. Although one side of the kitchen is taken up with the ovens, the piles of wood and scattered pots and caldrons, the area nearest the entrance leading out to the courtyard and shrine is relatively uncluttered. Matted platforms are set against the wall available for the arrival and comfort of a guest.

The openness and readiness to accommodate anyone in the kitchen applies to visitors and members of the community, and extends most certainly to the anthropologist. Although there are rarely more than three at any given time, outside visitors to the monastery are frequent. Today, Tensin, has arrived. He enters the gate of the temple courtyard, by passing the shrine although it is apparent there is a religious service in progress. The chanting continues from behind the doors. On the steps are scores of pairs of empty shoes left scattered around by the praying monks and nuns. Tensin proceeds into the kitchen to announce himself. He has walked for several hours; as is customary the *gonpa* is some distance above the last village. He has bundles of baggage he is eager to unload. Although his is not a familiar face, this man is not a total stranger. Someone has undoubtedly recognized him and sent word to his daughter, a nun here, that he has arrived. Any others of his kinsmen living here will be informed in the same quiet and unobtrusive way. There is no buzz of gossip, no excited call, and no flurry of questions to break the pattern of routine and movement in the community. This response to the visitor is another part of that ability of the monastery to accommodate the needs of whomever enters its orbit.

The man's welcome inside the kitchen is also quiet, and there is apparent neither delight nor disturbance of any sort occasioned by his arrival. Knowing a

message will be conveyed to his daughter, he silently accepts the hospitality of the kitchen, climbs onto a mat near the door and again, without a comment or appearing to notice, allows a bowl of hot buttery tea to be poured for him. Eventually there is an enquiry about his village and about his companion, for people do not usually travel any distance alone in these mountains, not even a sturdy trader. The cook-nun returns now and invites him to lift the bowl. Tensin drinks, talks, and the bowl is refilled several times before his daughter appears. She has been with the others in the *lha-khañ*, participating in the recitation which today is the invocation to the chief patron of this community, the Lord Padmasambhava. She has been excused for a few hours now that her kinsman has arrived. She shows none of the excitement she feels but waits attentively for instructions from the Chagdzo as to what assistance she might provide. Only later will she have an opportunity to hear the eagerly awaited news from her family and village friends, and to open the gifts of food and cloth her father has brought. Meanwhile she slips out as quietly as she entered, taking his bags to her but beyond the main compound where she begins brewing a cup of tea at her corner hearth. Later she will prepare a bed for her father who Chagdzo has suggested will share the tiny dwelling during his stay here.

One of the reasons Tensin has come at this time is to request a divination from the lama on the forthcoming betrothal of his son at home; he may also consult the lama about the progress of his daughter and whether or not it is advisable for the girl's grandmother, widowed last year, to come and live with her in the monastery. Last year at the time of his father's death, Tensin came here to make the lama the *ngö-rten* offering and request the special funerary recitation that every lama must bestow on his devotee. The abbot of this monastery, as the *Tsebai Lama* of both Tensin and of the father is obliged to perform such life-crisis rites even though he does not see the corpse or visit the home of the deceased man. Now, since a year has passed it is time for the son of that dead man to sponsor a memorial rite.

Arrangements for this will be made, upon advice of the lama, during the few days Tensin is here. Whether a visitor's purpose in coming here is personal or religious, he has first to consult Chagdzo, who then makes the appropriate arrangements: his accommodation, and audience with the lama, accounts for services performed and materials needed. Laymen come with specific requests and generally do not spend much time in the *lha-khañ* where from dawn to dark every day the monks and nuns are assembled, chanting and making offerings on behalf of such visitors. There is a recognized code of reciprocation between the monks, trained and skilled in communicating with the superior forces, and the more susceptible



he come for the relief and assistance the rituals can effect, happy to pay for these services, and in turn the monks and nuns fulfilling the traditional role of the Sangha oriented towards serving their patrons, are obliged to respond. There is therefore no reason for a layman to interfere with the ritual or to participate by joining the monks and nuns. He gains more merit by allowing them to work for him as well as continuing their own spiritual studies. It is only at the climactic point in the ceremony when the *tsog* is offered that he enters the shrine; even then he remains for no more than an hour. Contrary to his relaxed demeanor in kitchen, he appears awestruck and subdued, prostrating three times before entering the shrine. The lama may or may not be presiding, but the man makes the symbolic layman whose worldly preoccupations inflict him with pain and distress. And so presentation of a white *karthag* to the throne and drapes additional scarves at the base of the icons of patron deities glistening in their benign and gracious opulence. Here the awe of the visitor is in contrast to the occupied and relaxed attitude of the assembled monks and nuns who, not appearing to notice Tensin's arrival and departure, proceed with their work.

After sitting for a while in deference to those gods who have been summoned and assembled for his *tsog*, the visitor makes a quiet exit. The rest of the day, if it is sunny, he wanders about the courtyard muttering mantras, or sits against a warm wall away from the wind fingering his prayer beads. Rising, he circumambulates the shrine that continues to pulse with the chanting. Most of the time however Tensin remains with us in the kitchen; if he does not volunteer his help, he will be invited to assist in a minor domestic chore which still permits him to engage in our conversations. Although he was almost as stranger on his first day, within a short time Tensin becomes part of the trust and conviviality that pervade this community. It is easy for me to ask Tensin some of the many questions on my mind; he responds freely to those about his family and village, but hesitates to be explicit about his religious beliefs evading those of my questions relating to the subject. It is not because he cannot articulate his views; rather he prefers to express his religious attitude by emphasizing his devotion to his lama. A devotee, lay or cleric, if he is serious about religious matters has a *Tsebai Lama*, a guru to whom he owes obeisance who in turn becomes his teacher and advisor. What the lama imparts to his devotee is between the two of them, and the latter, if he is not specifically initiated to pass on the doctrine to others has no right to instruct or to explain religion, not even to a well-meaning anthropologist. But *dharma* or *choga* are in any case too abstract, not the subject of conversation among those in either kitchen or monastery. What they will talk about is their own lama. A devotee will eagerly engage in a long tribute to his lama: the story of the lama's discovery and boyhood, the miracles he performed, with whom he studied, the

events he prophesied, the centres he consecrated, the reliquaries he constructed or those he visited, for lamas also go on pilgrimages; we will be provided with figures of the lama's financial assets, his richest and most prestigious sponsors, the size of the crowds attending his lectures, the number of novices he initiates each year, and numerous minute details of the patriarch's personal idiosyncracies. This recounting, like the writing of a biography of a saint or master, is a highly regarded act of piety as well as a sign of one's religious learning. Extolling the virtues of one's lama is for the Tibetan Buddhist an appropriate way of expressing his beliefs: his lama is for him the embodiment of his Buddhist ideals, the model of selflessness, of compassion, of knowledge applied towards relieving the suffering of all sentient beings. The devotee recognizes in his lama, a man who having experienced hardships has gone on to surpass both the difficulties and the desires from which they arise. Simply to recognize these qualities in one's teacher is to show an acceptance of the Buddhist ideals and a loyalty to them.

Not only laymen but also monks and nuns avoid my specific questions about religious matters, referring me each time directly to the lama, their own teacher. Having failed to obtain any instructive hints from the visitor Tensin or his daughter, a demure and intelligent nun already familiar with much of the liturgy, I decided to turn to the ancient mumbling monk, sitting near me in the kitchen, stooped over his texts. Since he had volunteered to mark my spelling, it seemed probable he might respond equally enthusiastically to my doctrinal queries. But he suggested simply that I should improve my English calligraphy which he clearly was less carefully exercised than my Tibetan script.

I look again at Chagdzo, my most accommodating host who seemed to take a degree of responsibility in facilitating my work. He granted the nuns and monks permission to leave their work in order that I might interview each individually: he allowed my long talks in the lama's chamber to continue uninterrupted, and he confided in me some of the details of his own difficult youth, but not once did Chagdzo undertake to instruct me in anything but technical matters. He informed me of budget management, of the scheduling of rituals, what ingredients must be added in which type of offerings, of the various offices and training procedures at the monastery as well as details of its economy. He often anticipated what might be of interest to me. For example, when sitting in the kitchen together, if Chagdzo, alerted by a particular pulse of the gongs and bells to the arrival of a colorful part in the ceremony in progress across the courtyard he prompts me to move into the *lha-khan*. Remaining at his desk he sees that my tea bowl and a cushion are transferred to my seat among the row of nuns. Chagdzo only appears in the shrine during those periods of the day that the lama is enthroned there leading the ritual, and at

those times you will usually find me there as well. Here again Chagdzo takes it upon himself to alert me by subtle eye signals from his own position beside the throne as to where I should position myself for photographing, recording and notating the highlights of the ceremony.

Chagdzo, as the highest office next to the lama, could be interpreted as a secular rank: the administrative arm of the religious leader representing a division of authority between religious and secular. This is not the case however; the office of Chagdzo can be reached only by way of many years of training and study in the academic, artistic and administrative skills and their underlying religious principles and culture. Chagdzo is forty-eight now, but he joined a monastery at the age of ten first taking instruction from his maternal uncle with whom he lived. Over the last thirty-eight years he has trained by working in every office and at every monastic art: as *umseh*, cymbalist and master of the ritual; *chös-pön*, master of the offerings; *khon ner*, the temple keeper; *ge kyo*, chief disciplinarian; he trained on each of the ritual instruments: gyeling horn, durm, conch shell and trumpets. He has learned the arts of cooking, calligraphy, printing, accounting, grammar, painting and ceremonial design as well as the preparation of tablets, amulets and other curatives and purifying agents to be dispensed by the lama.

These skills combined with the understanding of *dharma* and liturgy enable Chagdzo to assist and advise a devotee coming to see the lama. First, before Tensin is to have his audience with the lama, he has to prepare his symbolic offering in the kitchen where, borrowing a tray from the cook, he proceeds to prepare his gifts. Grain is heaped to a peak, laced with a few cellophane-wrapped candies, dates or raisins brought from a distant market, and then crowned with some bills of currency that have been rolled and set firmly into the pile of grain. Chagdzo assists the slightly nervous devotee with the arrangement of the plate for it must look beautiful as well as correct and opulent. To finish it off he provides Tensin with a newly washed white *karthag* which he then drapes over the tray. After every thing is set, Tensin is poured another cup of tea while Chagdzo checks with the lama. He returns shortly, having announced the visitor and instructs Tensin to proceed with his tray up the separate guest's stairway to the chamber. The private conference between the man and his teacher may last but a moment, but some are longer. Invariably Chagdzo is summoned either to serve tea to the lama and his guest or to be consulted on schedules and stores.

After his final audience Tensin has returned to the kitchen, not entranced by a charisma of a living Buddha, but rather mindful of each syllable of advice he had been given. He sips his tea while initiating arrangements with Chagdzo after

the lama's diagnoses. Again combining his technical, administrative and liturgical knowledge Chagdzo is able to implement the necessary proceedings. In this case the lama has divined that Tensin observe his father's memorial by planting a prayer flag in the fields above the temple here. It is agreed that the white muslin for the flag may be purchased from the monastery store and then stamped with the assistance of two nuns familiar with the block-printing process. Tensin will also have the *Dom-bum* read for his father, but that is to be arranged by local monks when he returns to his village. Meanwhile Chagdzo pushes ahead with preparations for the prayer flag offerings, instructing Tensin to fetch an ax from the corner and cut-down a tree 25 feet high for the pole of the flag. One of the nuns, a kinswoman of the deceased father is to prepare the cloth and is thus freed from a day of chanting. The cloth to be used is fifteen inches wide and eighteen feet long; it is washed and dried and then dampened again just before printing. Another nun prepares the ink, a glue-based liquid made from charcoal powder collected off the bottom of cooking vessels. Water is gradually added to the powder in a long tedious process of mixing and stirring in a stone mortar borrowed from the calligraphy room. All this together with the printing is supervised by Chagdzo. A corner of the platform in the kitchen is cleared away to become the printing table, and when the ink is ready we can begin. The block, engraved with a mirror image of the prayer to be set, is brought from the library and the cloth is dampened and stretched. While one helper swabs the face of the block, two nuns pull a lengthwise section of the cloth taut above the block. They rest it down squarely and then press the cloth with the palms of their hands to ensure it takes up a strong image. The prayer block is not changed. The printing is repeated again and again, moving the narrow strip of muslin down of foot or so at a time, so in the end we have what appears to be one long continuous image of lines of syllables. Chagdzo oversees the entire exercise which with the care it receives is not complete until the late afternoon. The block is washed thoroughly and reshelved with countless others in a dark corner of the library, and the printed sheet is strung to dry in the courtyard. On the third day before Tensin departs for his village, at the auspicious time designated by the lama the pole is prepared for raising. The prayer cloth is tacked to the pole along its entire edge so that the flag flutters all the way down the eighteen feet of its length. Then a colourful canopy of blue, white, yellow and red bands sewn together by the monastery tailor is pinned into the top of the pole, and with cheers to the gods it is raised in one thrust by all available hands from the kitchen. Even Chagdzo accompanies us to above the temple where the launching takes place. *Kyi kyi lha-sol-wa, lha-sol-awa.*

Perhaps I could have made a paper copy of that prayer and set about to translate it; or, I might have climbed further up the mountain to one of those lofty

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Himalayan huts to meditate and eat nettles; I could possible have set out over the hills in search of a hermit yogini to initiate me; but instead I rejoined Chagdzo and the cooks and the young monks below in the kitchen preparing more tea.

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